

# Charles Belle

## Biography



Charles Belle, "ivre de l'ombre", Musée du Temps, Besançon (25) | Retrospective *"to paint"* 2022 > 2023  
"confiés à la forêt", 2015 - 2021, charcoal and ink on canvas, 285 x 625 cm  
Adagp Paris, 2023

## Biography



"de jamais...", 2014, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 150 cm  
Adagp Paris, 2023

Charles Belle is a French painter renowned for his approach to representing natural elements in often monumental formats. He explores his subjects with at times tender and profound realism, at times intense and sensual strokes. Certain paintings are dark, silent, profound, while others seem imbued with a certain lyricism.

Despite his humble background (his father was a baker in his home village of Rochejean), the young Charles Belle chose to study at the regional fine arts school of Besançon (today's Institut Supérieur des Beaux-Arts – ISBA). After obtaining his DNSEP advanced degree in fine arts in 1979 and while continuing his own artistic explorations, he first became a photographer for the Besançon Museum of Time and then a secondary-school art teacher, before eventually teaching drawing at the Mulhouse fine arts school (today's Haute École des Arts du Rhin – HEAR) up until 1998.

His first works were large drawings representing local persons, landscapes and ordinary everyday objects such as shoes. Given the particular artistic context of the late 1970s, he enjoyed the support of few professors, with his drawings out of sync with the time's art school teachings and trends. Yet his works soon caught the attention of both art collectors and the Fonds National d'Art Contemporain (national collection of contemporary art, maintained by the CNAP).

The themes of his paintings are more as a pictorial pretext than a realist subject. His flower-themed works have proven a great success, but he has explored with equal commitment a great diversity of themes. All of his paintings have in common their seeking out the unseeable, that which lies beyond the image, to be found off-frame.

From 2022 to 2023, an extensive retrospective exhibition dedicated to his oeuvre has assembled 7 French museums and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



*hominien dont je me souviens, auto-posthume portrait*, 1994  
oil on canvas, 203 x 236 cm. inv.331

In 1994, Charles Belle painted his *hominien dont je me souviens, auto-posthume portrait (hominid whom I remember, posthumous self-portrait)*.

On a 203 x 236 cm canvas, a skull emerges from a black background. Along with his *innocent*<sup>\*</sup>, this is the only painting in which Charles Belle uses black. The solid swaths of darkness suddenly stop a third of the way from the bottom – a powerfully evocative interruption of the artistic act.

The skull's empty eye sockets seem to follow viewers wherever they go.

<sup>\*</sup> *innocent*, 1990, oil on canvas, 205 x 281 cm. inv.519

"It amounts to an infinite painting." Thus did Charles Belle express his feelings painting *à la conjonction des méandres exaltés*<sup>\*</sup> from 2016 to late 2017.

But this phrase might well be applied to his entire oeuvre, for none of his works is ever truly finished. Charles Belle is a painter in continual motion and each of his paintings can be called into question at any moment. Indeed, none of his works can be considered definitive as long as they remain in his studio. He takes them up again, pursues their painting or covers them entirely with new strokes, sometimes several years after they were first begun. His paintings feed upon those serving as their socles. He considers his paintings as living things that are born, evolve and eventually disappear. Their memory leaves sedimentary traces on the canvass. A new painting appears atop another. It exists in that which has disappeared.

Charles Belle's oeuvre occupies this unstable equilibrium. The impermanence of painting, of breathing, of traces. Shadow's silence expressed.

Charles Belle draws nourishment from vaster sources than mere intention and imagination. His painting is intuitive, it is organically born. His colours are deep and complex and he never uses black. If he's not amassing or piling up matter, then he's cutting or scraping it away to allow for light, vibrations. Though these strata of past paintings could never be recovered or reconstructed, yet he seeks to render them palpable.

Charles Belle explores the theme of nature, but without seeking any realist representation. He's more seduced by a certain abstraction, for in his mind "*The subject of a painting isn't the subject!*". Whether a painting be figurative or abstract is of little significance. His art is fed by a search for pictorial solutions to discuss feelings, sensations and emotions, the invisible. His works allow viewers to feel what isn't shown. While the public is most familiar with his paintings of flowers, Charles Belle has also extensively explored other themes. And anyway he explains that when he paints flowers, "they are not flowers"... What interests him are all the signals that a painting might transmit, directly yet indefinably, in the manner of music.

Charles Belle's drawings are less well known, yet just as extensive as his paintings.

The essence of his art has its origins in his approach to drawing. He never makes croquis or preparatory sketches for paintings, for his drawn works enjoy the same status as his painted creations. His considerable production of drawings includes a few monumental works.

<sup>\*</sup> *à la conjonction des méandres exaltés*, 2017, oil on canvas, 237 x 377 cm. inv.274





In the autumn of 2017, **the La Terrasse art centre in Nanterre** invited Charles Belle to create a monumental work to adorn the egg-shaped outdoor theatre of the Parc des Anciennes-Mairies. Since 2011, thanks to the imagination of the artist Christophe Cuzin, La Conque has staged Île-de-France's largest outdoor concave canvass of contemporary painting.

Charles Belle drew a spruce tree in charcoal on an orange acrylic background. No fixative was afterwards applied, to allow the charcoal to evolve over time. This drawing remained visible for two years in the municipal garden.

► Discover this work on **the TRAM network** :  
<http://tram-idf.fr/charles-belle-sens-figures-terrasse/>

***sens figurés***, 2017-2019  
acrylic and charcoal on concrete,  
18 x 20 metres. inv.253



draw  
draw  
draw



Drawing constitutes an essential part of Charles Belle's oeuvre. He doesn't consider drawing as subservient to painting, never making croquis or preparatory sketches. Rather, the act of drawing represents the very foundation of Charles Belle's creative approach, the means for his seeking to express what one might call the soul or spirit.



In 2007, he began a project of Indian-ink drawings. Using a large quill, he set about outlining every leaf on his fig tree. One fig leaf for every sheet of paper, "une feuille pour une feuille". All at once identical and different. His going about these drawings in a state of utter absorption resembled a sort of choreography, and during two months he was completely immersed within this particular rhythm.

One night, the few remaining leaves fell due to frost, and the series stopped there. **1,473 fig leaves had been drawn.**

Impossible to present all the drawings and impossible to present only a portion, this installation constituted an essential poetic act.



► Discover the film by François Royet  
**Le figuier, tout !** –2008, duration: 14 minutes  
<https://vimeo.com/107851889>



**dessiner  
dessiner  
dessiner**  
2007-2022  
ink on paper, wood  
205 x 100 x 118 cm, inv.710

## A bull in the studio !

In 2009, Charles Belle imagined exploring the theme of the "bull", so he discussed with a breeder the possibility of actually bringing this animal into his studio. This out-of-the-ordinary project raised a few concerns. Indeed, immediately prior to the artist's visit, a farmworker had been killed by a bull... Charles Belle set up a metallic structure within his studio to welcome the bull named Balou. During twelve days, the animal served as the artist's model, inspiring several dozen drawings and a series of paintings.

► Discover the film by François Royet  
**Le peintre et son modèle... Un taureau !** 2011, duration: 16 minutes  
• <https://vimeo.com/39052854>







work in progress & *hominien dont je me souviens*, *auto-posthume portrait*, 1994, oil on canvas, 203 x 236 cm. inv.331





*à jamais mortel*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 203 x 203cm-inv.309

## Films

A feature film as well as several short films and documentaries have focused on Charles Belle's oeuvre.

In 2004, the filmmaker François Royet, fascinated by the mystery of artistic creation, met Charles Belle during a visit to his studio. Upon discovering this painter's particular world, he expressed his desire to make a short film. A short while later, Charles Belle in turn shared his own intention to paint several monumental 10-metre canvasses. François Royet would subsequently film the artist at work, for his first 26-minute film *«Captation 01, ce chou si beau»*, afterwards declaring that he would like to be there each time Charles Belle begins a new work. This marked the start of a long collaboration and close friendship between the painter and the filmmaker. Their easy complicity has allowed François Royet to closely film the artist at work and given birth to the current project for a feature-length film... The filming of this film lasted 16 years.

François Royet thus presents this latest project: ***"By filming the painter Charles Belle for sixteen years, I've amassed a treasure trove. With nearly 300 hours of rushes stretching back to 2004, I now have available an immensity of footage for a 80-minute film.***

***Accompanying in this manner an artist through the years, as he faces out-of-the-ordinary challenges or simply pursues his studio's everyday activities, represents a unique and profound exploration of the vitality of life and of creation. These images intimately share emotions and doubts, tremblings and vertigos.***

***My approach to filmmaking is the same. This film translates what it means to create. [...] Rather than a documentary on a painter or a theoretical essay on the definition of art, the film constitutes a work in and of itself."***

► Trailer «Par-delà les silences» : <https://www.youtube.com/>



***l'âme***, 2010, charcoal on canvas, 237 x 377 cm. inv.218  
photo Jean-Christophe Laurent

## *in situ*

Rochejean, the village of Charles Belle's childhood, is located near Mont d'Or, the highest peak of France's Doubs department. In 2010, he decided to pursue a project at the top of Mont d'Or around a beech tree. While undoubtedly ancient, this tree remains small and knotted due to its particularly hostile environment, where it has nevertheless managed to survive.

Charles Belle set up three large canvasses in the landscape near the tree. Using cables firmly fixed to the ground, the canvasses were stretched to resist the summit's violent winds. However, on the morning of only the second day, the installation was uprooted by a storm. Finding his canvasses lying on the ground, Charles Belle had to start all over again to continue the paintings.

The first canvas, ***l'âme*** \*, 237 x 377 cm, shows the silhouette of intertwined trunks and branches emerging from the night.

Charles Belle next painted this tree from another angle: ***hêtre prémonitoire*** \* is like a frozen white phantom set against the deep blue background of an immense night.

The third and final painting, ***de son nom*** \*, was quickly made on a sunny day. It presents the beech's silhouette set against an intense yellow background.

\****l'âme***, 2010, fusain sur toile, 237 x 377 cm. inv.218

***hêtre prémonitoire***, 2010, acrylique sur toile, 237 x 377 cm. inv.210

***de son nom***, 2010, acrylique sur toile, 290 x 333 cm. inv.208





photos Jean-Christophe Laurent



***hêtre prémonitoire***, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 237 x 377 cm. inv.210  
photo Jean-Christophe Laurent





*le vertige des anges*, 2018,  
acrylic on canvas, 203 x 237cm-inv.263





**confiés à la forêt**, 2015-2021  
charcoal on canvas, 285 x 625 cm, inv.11

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## confiés à la forêt

In the winter of 2015, Charles Belle set up a vast canvas measuring 285x625 cm in the heart of his childhood forest, choosing an out-of-the-way, nearly inaccessible location. On-site he crafted a tool comprising a branch and a block of charcoal, which he then used to “hurl” his drawing onto the canvass stretched between two trees. The conditions were difficult, with the canvass warping, the tree branches ever in the way and the snow often deep.

Yet his movements remained ample and forceful, the blacks intense and the lines vibrant, as the work took shape. An abstract drawing, or perhaps a representation of branches, depending on the viewer... He then made a second, even more obscure and impenetrable drawing on the second side of the canvass.

He thought he had created his ultimate work. A work that no one would ever see, that would never be exhibited, that he had abandoned to the forest.

The canvass thus remained during many long months, spoiled, patinated and clawed at by the wind and the branches, the snow and the rain. When Charles Belle returned early the following autumn, he found the site overgrown with vegetation, as though nature were asserting its rights over this intruder. With a block of charcoal, he drew over the initial drawing, as the black dust encrusted his skin, his eyes, his very flesh.

Once again, he then abandoned his drawings. Roughly handled by the powerful natural elements, subject to the rhythm of the forest, Charles Belle imagined that his drawings would disappear, torn by a storm or destroyed by a falling tree...

The lines of the first drawing reemerged beneath the black, as the charcoal ran and the branches left their marks.

Charles Belle would wait an entire year before returning, accompanied by his friend Bernard Kudlak in the midst of imagining the **Cirque Plume**’s final spectacle. When the latter discovered these sylvan drawings, he suggested integrating them into the circus show.

They later returned with the entire troop to remove the installation. Dancing and playing music as though performing some pagan ritual, they festively carried the immense canvas out of the forest.

Originally destined to disappear in absolute silence, the drawings’ story continues, accompanying the Cirque Plume on its world tour for **“La Dernière Saison”** (from 2018 to 2020).

In 2021, Charles Belle reworks the two drawings.

► [www.cirqueplume.com](http://www.cirqueplume.com)

► **Discover the film by François Royet - music David Lynch & Marek Zebrowski**

**confiés à la forêt**, 2018, duration: 20 minutes

<https://vimeo.com/38696207>

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*confiés à la forêt*, 2015-2021, charcoal on canvas, 285 x 625 cm, inv.11





*penchée généralement*, 2008-2021,  
acrylic on canvas, 290 x 333 cm -inv. 219



*penchée généralement*, 2008-2021, acrylic on canvas, 290 x 333 cm -inv. 219

*tous les reliefs d'une nuit*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 290 x 333 cm - inv. 224

*ivre de l'ombre*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 290 x 333 cm - inv. 215





## Contact France

Noémie PAYA  
Art Agent

+33 (0) 3 81 588 850  
+33 (0) 7 86 200 200  
noemipaya@hotmail.fr  
www.noemipaya.com

15 Grande rue — 25870 Tellenay  
France

